Canadian Women in Politics:

From Victims to Victors

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It has been 75 years since women won the right to vote and to hold elected office in Alberta, and nearly 70 years since the widespread federal franchise was obtained. At that time, new doors were opened for women, and those who took part looked ahead to the time when many other women would succeed them in our legislatures and our parliament.

They anticipated the time, not to be long in coming, when women would be on firm and equal footing with their male colleagues in the houses where decisions are made. Those projections, however, have yet to be met.

In the years since women won the right to vote, the pace of the strides toward equality has been sluggish. At this point, women comprise only 14% of representatives at the federal level, and the provinces often fare even worse. Why are women still so underrepresented? What can we do to improve equality in the formal political sphere?

There are several matters that must first be addressed before the issues are examined further. This paper proceeds under the definition of formal political involvement as seeking nomination, running as a candidate for an election, and/or being an elected representative at the federal or provincial level. This issue must be separated from the important matter of women's involvement in politics in other ways, such as membership in special interest pressure groups, or work on campaigns for candidates other than themselves.

Secondly, only federal and provincial politics in Canada are being addressed here. Further to the problem of the sheer volume of information on other levels of government or other jurisdictions, the natures of these political arenas also differ sufficiently to warrant their separate consideration.

Finally, the underlying assumption of this paper is that the equal representation of women and men in political arenas is a desired end, insofaras better representation of women in the legislatures should amount to more equal substantive involvement of women in forming policy and legislation. As Maillé (1990) expressed it, the assumption is that "Political power is the nerve centre of all social change."

This assumption is not intended to undermine the recognition of women's specificity as legislators (Miles and Finn, 1982). While many feminists argue that we must not simply adhere to the male power structure but find ways to change and introduce new systems, affirming women's right to equal representation in the current political structure does not undermine this cause but may, in my opinion, be pursued in parallel. I acknowledge the validity of the feminist appeal to alter the power structure, but my aim here is to examine ways to get more women into the existing system. As Bashevkin (1985) pointed out, it is alright to make efforts from the outside, but a great deal of work can be accomplished from the inside out as well.

This discussion first necessitates outlining the extent of female political representation in Canada currently, and the origins of the barriers to it. In establishing the problems, one may then search for answers.

Specifics of Underrepresentation

An overview of the current status of women in our legislatures is in order.

PROVINCE	NUMBER OF WOMEN	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER OF WOMEN IN CABINET	PERCENTAGE
ALBERTA	13	15.7	3	11.1
BRITISH COLUMBIA	9	13.0	1	4.3
MANITOBA	11	19.3	3	17.6
NEW BRUNSWICK	8	13.8	4	16.6
NEWFOUNDLAND	2	3.8	1	6.6
NOVA SCOTIA	3	5.8	0	0.0
ONTARIO	28	22.4	11	42.3
P. E. I.	7	21.9	2	18.2
QUEBEC	23	18.4	6	20.0
SASKATCHEWAN	6	9.4	1	5.0
FEDERAL	40	13.5	7	17.9

Source: Library of Parliament, Information and Technical Services Branch, "Compilations - Women presently sitting in the Parliament and the Provincial Legislatures", Ottawa, 1991; and Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Women in Politics: Becoming Full Partners in the Political Process, Ottawa, 1989.

The percentage of women holding office at the federal level in 1984 was only 9.6%, and increased to 13.5% in 1988. At the provincial level, 6.2% of seats were held by women in 1982, increasing to 12.4% in 1988. The record numbers of women being elected in recent years do show real growth, but still represent only a small fraction of the relative proportion of women in the public generally (Bashevkin, 1985).

The numbers of women in cabinet is also improving, but slowly. The most dramatic case is, of course, the recently elected NDP government in Ontario. Not only are eleven members of the cabinet women, but they include a female Minister of Energy and Minister of Revenue. Other provinces have also been getting more women into cabinet, and a better distribution of women over portfolios.

What are the Barriers?

Barriers to the full participation of women in the political process have been identified at every stage along the way, from the grass roots level of freedom to become involved to attaining the most powerful cabinet portfolios. Although an overview does not succeed in underlining the complexity of these obstacles, a general understanding of the nature of them is necessary before options for improving the situation can be properly addressed.

Basic Socioeconomic Barriers

The ground level of freedom to participate in the political process is most often cited as the greatest source of obstructions for women. Overall inequalities in the areas of socioeconomic standing and childrearing responsibilities cannot be overlooked as a root cause of the inequality of the genders in our legislatures.

The most obvious barrier to any type of political involvement by women is the sex-role stereotyping and socialization that both men and women face. Politics, particularly at levels beyond the municipal, are still viewed as a male domain, reinforced by the image of the woman as the homemaker, and the guardian of the personal sphere, and the male as the representative of the family in the public sphere (Bashevkin, 1985). This has also been called the women's "culture of exclusion from politics" (Maillé, 1990).

But the barriers are also far more tangible than the simplicity of the stereotype. Features of women's socioeconomic position make it difficult for them to free themselves to pursue political life. A main feature is employment. Women who are not employed outside the home are less exposed to formal politics, and have less opportunity to discuss the issues and to become informed about them (Brodie, 1985).

In addition, women still make, on average, only two thirds as much as men (Maillé, 1990.). It costs money to run an election campaign and, further, a secure job and accessible savings are required to enable any candidate to take

time away from work to pursue a campaign. These things are more difficult for women, generally, due to their lower economic positions.

Because of the generally lower earnings of women, they are less able to expend money on campaigning for the nomination, and less able to take time off their employment to promote themselves politically. Women who work inside the home are at an even greater disadvantage than working women, because their work is neither recognized as valuable nor compensated monetarily (Brodie, 1985). They generally have less disposable cash than women who are employed outside the home. It requires little research to ensure that men have an advantage in this regard as well.

Childbearing and rearing responsibilities are likely the most crucial factor for women making the decision to run for office. Female legislators have tended, as a group, to be unmarried and childless, or the mothers of grown children (Bashevkin, 1985).

As women continue to hold the balance of childcare responsibilities, they are less able to spend the time required to seek nomination or election, or to commit to the tremendous number of hours that legislators are required to put in. Further, holding elected office means, for many, spending a great deal of time away from home altogether, in the capital city. Although this practice has been accepted, and even esteemed, where male politicians are involved, women are continually faced with the concern of sharing their childrearing responsibilities in ways which would allow them the time to hold elected office.

Apart from the real demands of time and emotion required for raising children, even women who do have adequate arrangements with their spouses or childcare facilities must also supersede the public perception that they should be at home with their children. Several women candidates and legislators have heard the comment "Well, what will you do with your children (if you are elected)?" (Palamarek, 1991). The citizenry may be less inclined to vote for a woman simply on the assumption that women should not seek jobs that would take them away from their children. As one legislator told me, "It helps to have white hair" (Hewes, personal interview, 1991).

This perception influences women's own assessment of their ability to hold political office also. As Bashevkin (1985) noted, the impact of traditional role constraints combined with an underestimation of one's own political potential results in few women seeking positions of visible political influence.

Thus, the public perception of childrearing as a solely female responsibility, and the reality of that responsibility, are real barriers to women entering politics. Not only must the practice become more egalitarian, but the perceptions of raising children as a strictly "female domain" must change also.

Party Nominations

The next hurdle women must face is getting nominated in their constituencies to represent the parties of their choice in an election. Even if the socioeconomic obstacles can be overcome so that a woman feels she could take the financial and social costs of running for (or, possibly, being elected to)

political office, it is difficult for some women to be recognized by their parties.

Studies have shown that women are often nominated in ridings that are thought of as "unwinnable" by their party. Women apparently have a much better shot at receiving the nomination of their party in lost cause ridings, as statistics have shown (CACSW, 1988). In the 1984 federal election, for example, 300 women sought nomination. Of that, only 18, or 8%, were nominated in constituencies where their party had won at least three of the last five elections (CACSW, 1988).

In addition, Brodie and Vickers (1982) have identified this phenomena and suggest that party control over recruitments constitutes a critical barrier to increased participation by women in Canadian politics.

In the 1984 federal election, only one Progressive Conservative woman won a nomination in Alberta, a province where such a nomination could virtually have guaranteed a seat (CACSW, 1988).

Upon gaining nomination, then, men have a much better chance than women of gaining a seat. Over the last twenty years, one out of every four men seeking election won the seat, whereas women's success rate has been less than one in ten (CACSW, 1988).

In addition to party pressure to leave women in ridings with poor chances, there are additional barriers that women face to getting nominated in any constituency. Several of these were mentioned in the previous section,

including public perception, access to childcare and access to savings and time to seek nomination.

Elections

Once nominated, women face some new barriers which must be addressed to allow them to campaign on the same grounds as their male opponents and party colleagues. Funding and voter bias work against women in some cases.

Women are already on unequal ground due to their likelihood to be nominated in ridings where their party has received little support in the past, as mentioned above. This situation in further compounded by difficulties in raising funds to support an election as a representative of that party. If it traditionally receives few votes in that constituency, the party likely also has less support in terms of volunteers to work on fundraising and in donations.

Additionally, seeking means of financing is also more difficult for women. Several studies have suggested that men, because they often come from business backgrounds, have better developed networks through which they can solicit corporate and private donations (Bashevkin, 1985). Women often have to rely on more numerous but smaller donations, instead of a few large contributions. This type of fundraising may be advantageous in some cases, but does take more time and requires more campaign workers.

A further barrier to the election of women that is frequently overlooked is incumbency. The tendency for incumbents to be re-elected is high, and, since

incumbents are overwhelmingly male, this further slows the transition of a male-dominated house to one of gender equality (Brodie, 1985).

Additionally, there is still an attitude among many voters that women do not make good legislators. Many electors, particularly men, have yet to shake the idea that politics is still the male domain. As noted in a quote obtained by Palamarek (1989), "Some people still would not consider a woman capable of representing them, but won't openly admit it". In discussing this issue prior to the writing of this paper, a man in his forties did admit this feeling to me quite openly. He simply said, "I'd never vote for a woman."

There have been dozens of elections since Louise McKinney and Roberta McAdams were elected in Alberta in 1917 as the first female provincial legislators. Agnes McPhail, elected to the House of Commons in 1921, sat as the first and only woman in that house for fourteen years. Surely these women expected the pace of change to be faster.

They were certain that other women would soon follow. As McPhail once commented about the women to come behind her own entrance into the House of Commons, "I could almost hear them coming" (Bashevkin, 1985). However, in the face of the barriers identified to participation that still exist at the basic social level, at the nomination meetings, and at the ballot boxes, it is not too surprising that few women have filled those expectations so far.

Getting into (and around in) Cabinet

Some women are getting elected to Canada's provincial legislatures. As they are entering the formal political sphere, women's involvement in the executive branches of governments also remains unequal, and additional foundations of gender barriers may be found at this level.

One woman legislator confessed that women are not always treated equally in her caucus, according to Palamarek (1989). She claimed, "At times there is a subtle sense of 'you wouldn't understand' attitude towards women in caucus."

Beyond acceptance in caucus and getting into cabinet, women are often not considered for cabinet portfolios beyond the scope of conventional areas of concern to women, such as health, social services, education and women's issues (Bashevkin, 1985). This has caused some distress to women, but it cannot be forgotten that a disproportionate number of women who enter politics are from social science backgrounds, whereas male politicians are more often from legal and business backgrounds (Bashevkin, 1985).

At least in part, then, this apparent slant reflects the true nature of skills and areas of expertise that elected women bring with them to cabinet. There are women, however, entering politics from legal and business backgrounds also, and it is suggested that they face extra barriers in convincing their caucus colleagues that they are competent in these areas of male-predomination (Brodie, 1985). This seems consistent with problems these women and women

like them face in the private sector also.

There have been a few encouraging signs in recent years that women are being asked to take on a greater variety of portfolios, although the fact remains that there are few women in the upper elite of the cabinets of the provinces and the federal government. The recent resignation of Bill Van Der Zalm in B.C. resulting in Rita Johnston becoming Premier has altered history, as no woman has ever been the leader of a province or the country. Also, the 1989 victory of Audrey McLaughlin as leader of the federal New Democrats has created a new feeling of optimism among women, as a prominent federal party has never been led by a woman before.

Other examples of women crossing the thresholds into powers that were traditionally in the male domain are federal Justice Minister Kim Campbell, and Barbara McDougall, who has held the posts of Employment and Immigration and, currently, External Affairs (Library of Parliament Compilations, 1991).

Options for Action

Having established that women are, in fact, significantly in the minority in provincial legislatures and the federal house, and having reviewed the literature concerning what barriers there are to equal participation, the question as to what to do about the situation remains.

There are several approaches to rectifying the current male/female disparity,

ranging from overt affirmative action practices to patiently waiting for the system to bring about its own equalization. They each have both merits and inadequacies. It should be pointed out that, given the current pace of increases in the percentages of women in the provincial and federal assemblies, it will take forty-five years for gender equality to arrive in the political sphere in Canada (CACSW, 1988).

The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women has, in its 1990 report compiled by Chantal Maillé, made several suggestions on how to improve the future of women in politics. Although acknowledging that such a reform is "not about to take place" (Maillé, 1990), proportional representation is considered a means by which women could obtain more seats in the legislatures. In general, proportional representation allows the promotion of special interest groups, and has worked well in some other jurisdictions in the past.

Most notably, the success of the Iceland Women's Alliance Movement in their proportional representation system shows that women can run on a feminist platform and gain support. In this case, an all-female slate is put forth, and the campaign issues are all centered on the concept of what is best for women and children (Maillé, 1990). This party has done surprisingly well in the few years since its inception. The validity of running on a gender-based single issue platform in a pluralistic system such as ours is, however, contestable. Nonetheless, women should also recognize that using a platform of women's issues may be a means of securing the votes of like-minded women. Feminist platforms are an option, according to the CACSW.

Quotas, argues the CACSW, also seem to be a feasible solution (Maillé, 1990). They put forth a suggestion to reserve 40% of the seats for women, thereby ensuring that women have a firm position in the House. Since the writing of that paper, the federal New Democratic Party has approved a resolution stating that a certain number of women must hold the nomination of that party within a given region. While not ensuring their election, then, this policy does ensure that a reasonable number of women make it to the ballot.

This initiative is in line with the assertion of the CACSW paper that political parties must adopt specific numerical targets for female candidates and representatives (Maillé, 1990). The concept of quotas has been the subject of considerable debate, and the issue has yet to be resolved. Some female politicians feel that this direction is not the best for women. The Hon. Elaine McCoy, Alberta's Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, has such an opinion: "I feel its counterproductive" (Personal interview, 1991).

Finally, the CACSW recommends that education and organization among women, which has been initiated, must be continued and pursued. This concept, is, I believe, agreed upon quite unanimously among women's groups. This is one resource we have that we can use freely, with or without the consent of male policy makers.

Views of Current Legislators

Not all of these solutions are feasible at this point. There are strong feelings about the status of women in our legislatures from the inside of those houses

as well. Difficulties in determining which type of support to provide for other women also exists for those women who have managed to overcome the barriers.

In pursuing equality in numbers, an important issue is the nature of women's decision making. This is important both with respect to identifying the need for equality, and for determining which approaches to gaining equality are most desirable. Many women agree that women bring a different approach to decision making, and that this must not be underestimated. It is important, according to the legislators interviewed, that it is understood that men and women are **not** necessarily congruous as legislators. "Women bring a different set of life experiences. There are sets of common experiences that women share, which men may not be involved in day to day," explained Ms. McCoy (Personal interview, 1991).

Mrs. Bettie Hewes, a Liberal M.L.A. elected in Edmonton-Goldbar, agreed. "Women are better decision makers in many instances" (Personal interview, 1991). She continued to explain that women bring their parenting skills and pragmatic attitude to their own decision making processes, and understand the dynamics of personal interaction because of their unique life experiences. They bring a "less rigid texture" to the face of decision making. In this way, women bring different but important skills and attitudes to the decision making process. These are parallel to but not identical with those of their male counterparts. She commented that the depth of women's life experiences helps them understand interpersonal dynamics, and makes them more flexible and pragmatic. Leaving this element out of decision making, she argued, deprives

both women and men.

Elected as an NDP Member for Edmonton-Avonmore, Mrs. Marie Laing made similar comments. She also argued that women bring a different set of concerns to public office, and different ways of dealing with those concerns. She pointed out a key problem that cannot be overlooked in assessing the representation of women and by women: childbearing and the commitment to children is what keeps women from the legislature, she argued, and yet it is exactly that commitment which makes women's input important, and which makes it important that they become involved in the political decision making process.

We must, then, recognize the centrality of childbearing to women's lives, and not make women choose one or the other. Our objective should be to address this issue directly, according to Mrs. Laing, by pursuing options such as on-site childcare at the legislature, and support for women with children who choose to become involved.

Reducing basic socioeconomic difference between men and women was also targeted by Mrs. Laing. Women make less, which makes it more difficult for them to leave their jobs and run for election. This situation is further exacerbated with the additional costs women incur regarding childcare.

According to this legislator, then, if childcare is addressed, more women may seek nomination, and they may find it easier to run successful campaigns. In addition, addressing the deeper social issues will also help to reduce the gender

gap.

Ms. McCoy, when asked what she thought was the most fundamental obstacle to women's political involvement, stated that "Childcare is **the** most important issue for women, across the board." She declared that childcare and the economic position of women have to be addressed directly, and that these issues indirectly affect many of women's concerns and life choices.

With reference to the concept of affirmative action, for example, Mrs. Hewes commented, "We don't like legislating morality, but it works faster" (Personal interview, 1991). She cited the Ontario government's equal pay for work of equal value legislation as a positive step, suggesting that further reductions in socioeconomic inequalities are essential to political equality. She also commented that women may not become more equal in society (or, consequently, in the Legislature) on their own, without some kind of proactive intervention at some level. "I want to think that society, through a sense of fairness and morality, will (increase the status of women), but it hasn't worked" (Personal interview, 1991).

Mrs. Hewes does, however, have suggestions to improve the current situation that do not rely on affirmative action policies. On the issue of nominations, she agrees that women are often chosen in ridings where the party has little chance of winning. She issues a challenge to those parties: "If you are serious about getting women elected, nominate them in winnable ridings" (Personal interview, 1991). To women who consider entering politics, she makes a similar assertion, "Only run where you believe you can win." These are

valuable words that women interested in politics should listen to, and Mrs. Hewes proposes a new attitude where women need not accept the second-rate political positions they have been channelled into in the past.

Ms. McCoy, as mentioned above, does not support quotas for nomination or election. She argued that, once you single out one group, others will follow with their own legitimate concerns and needs for representation which we must also incorporate. Natives, visible minorities and the handicapped are examples she gave of people with important concerns that need to be heard in the Legislature (Personal interview, 1991). We must be very cautious of skewing the democratic system. As suggested earlier, this type of approach works better in a system of proportional representation, where members can freely put forth their special interests without the regard that our legislators must have to representing their entire constituency.

Similarly, these three women each had comments to make concerning the validity of approaching politics on a feminist platform to gain election and get women represented. Mrs. Laing commented that running an election as a feminist and campaigning strictly to female voters definitely has its appeal. However, she noted, this type of approach entails separating men and women, and "women's issues" from men's. Our priority should be uniting the two, she asserted.

Mrs. Hewes also cautioned against the use of a feminist agenda. She argued that any legislator must represent all their constituents, and equal partnership should be the goal. In addition, she warned that running on a women's issues

campaign could be done as long as it is not identified as such by the public and the media. Running on such a strict agenda, according to Mrs. Hewes, sets one up for accusations and factionalism.

Ms. McCoy also stated that women should not campaign solely on a women's issues platform, although she rightfully acknowledged the hard work of women who have put these issues on the agenda. Unless there is proportional representation, she argued, no candidate should run on single issues. Ms. McCoy asserted that we should have both genders involved in the whole spectrum of decision making, and that we should not pursue the "single-issue people" model.

Further, this successful legislator put the responsibility on herself and other women and men in office to do what they can to encourage and support any qualified candidate. As she pointed out, women run for office because someone asks them. They have to be asked and encouraged to run. Although disagreeing that elected women should feel obligated to support other women, Ms. McCoy did state that women such as herself who do have an interest in seeing other women get elected should actively encourage and support other women.

So What do We Do?

Both academic analysts and women directly involved in politics agree that more women should be elected to our political arenas, for the sake of women and issues of concern to women. Others further assert that men will benefit from

the equal participation of women also (Hewes, Personal interview, 1991). There is, however, less agreement on how exactly to enact this new equality.

We are forced to contend with a great variety of issues in determining the best approaches to gender equality. The barriers exist at the most basic, fundamental level of women's lives, centering around childbearing, the family, and women's economic position. Further, women are faced by prejudices and stereotypes that make it difficult for them to get nominated in a winnable riding, and to put on an effective campaign for office. Equality is not attained with electoral victory, either. Gender parity in cabinet remains unrealized also.

Affirmative action on the part of political parties or the government is one option. However, the argument against quotas is, I believe, a strong one. Any representative must be a representative of a particular constituency, and not just a representative of a particular interest group. Our system requires that members represent a diversity of people, and should therefore be elected on the basis of a free vote on the relevant qualities of a candidate.

Women can and should get elected on their own, without formal intervention. We are getting close enough now that drastic action is not the key and, further, it is not the way women choose to act. In the same vein as women's distinct, consensus building approach to decision making, women approach gender equality with persuasive education and hard work. Women are looking for long-lasting, institutional change that both men and women accept. Gender quotas do not seem to be the solution in the Canadian context.

This is not to say, however, that there is nothing we can do. There are avenues for both men and women to foster gender equality in elected office.

A feminist platform should not be a requirement for the election of a woman. It is not necessary, for example, for a woman economist to pursue "women's issues" in the Legislature if that is not her particular area of expertise and understanding. Although the CACSW paper, for example, insists that female politicians identify themselves not just as women, but as feminists, to establish real networks of women in politics (Maillé, 1990), it is my assertion that, while identifying themselves as feminists, women need not feel obligated to take a particular stand, or any stand at all, on "women's issues".

It is an understanding, but not necessarily a self-proclamation, of feminism that should be expected from these legislators. Any elected woman must recognize that she arrived there because of the efforts of women before her, and the onus is then placed on her to do what she can. Some elected women prefer to steer clear of "women's issues" (Palamarek, 1989), but should be aware that, in addition to securing the vote, feminists before them made great strides toward improving the social and economic status of women, and toward giving women the freedom that these legislators are fortunate to enjoy. In that regard, then, they should remain true to themselves, as suggested by Ms. McCoy (Personal interview, 1991), but realize their role in educating other women that the obstacles can and will be overcome.

Further, using the label of "women's issues" should be cautioned against. By indiscriminately labelling certain issues in this way, we run the risk of

marginalizing them (Hewes, Personal interview, 1991). Additionally, designating these issues to be the domain of female politicians is an act of separation that may not further the cause of gender equality. We should instead identify these issues as important to all, and as things that both male and female legislators should pay attention to. Our aim should be partnership, not separation.

There are concrete steps that can be taken. Firstly, we must add social concerns to the mainstream agenda, which can be affected by male legislators as well as female, and by pressure groups of men and women. Included here must be strong efforts to improve the socioeconomic status of women, particularly in the areas of employment equity and access to childcare.

Inherent in the development of a comprehensive social agenda with women in mind, a strong factor remains the socialization of our children. As we teach the next generation, girls and women will come to understand that they have a right to seek elected office, and boys and men will learn that women representatives can be just as effective as men. As prejudices and stereotypes breakdown, the freedom for gender parity will arrive.

In addition to these very basic changes, education can improve the specific arenas of nomination and election also. As strong female role models emerge, they carry a message to other women that the barriers are surmountable, and that women have a place in politics. Further, networks of women are beginning to develop that must be actively nurtured, to ensure that women understand the opportunities that are open to them, and have the resources

to make the most of those opportunities.

The barriers, for many women, are real. It is more than a perception that women are still, on average, less advantaged than men in many important ways in society. However, a large part of the battle is for women, as a whole, to recognize that the cards are stacked against them, but that this situation will change and that women can find ways into the system. Women must not play a part in their own subordination. They must not let themselves be victims, but must insist on equality and make it known that women can and should be elected.

The message must be communicated to both men and women that women do have the qualities and support necessary to hold elected office. With a combined effort from the government, which must take steps to improve the socioeconomic position of women and their childcare options, from women in the legislatures and other positions of influence, who must take part in educating the women and men around them, and from women themselves, who must not accept an unequal governmental system, the pace of change can be quickened. There is a long way to go, but women are, and will continue to be, making partnerships with men to govern in a new and better way.

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